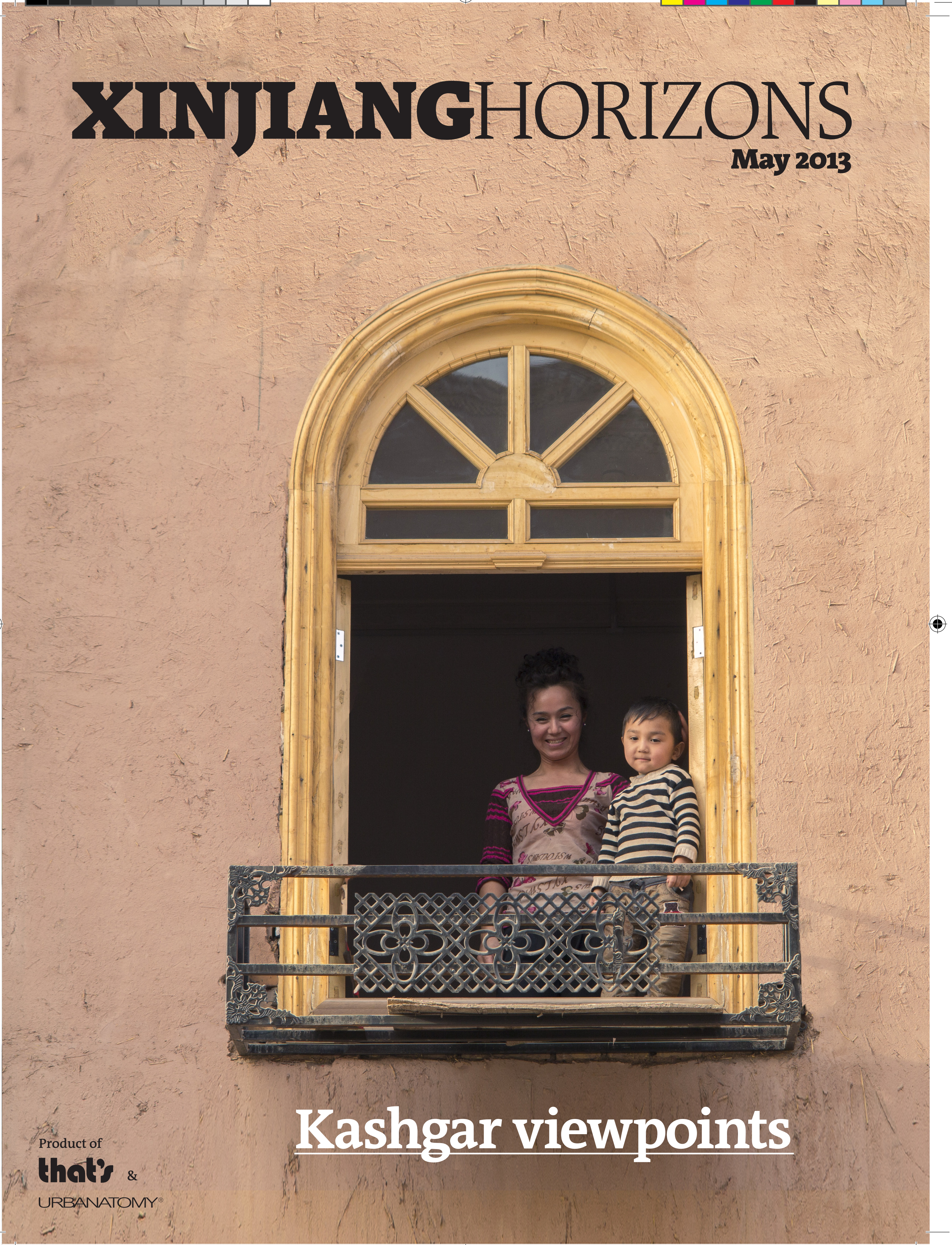
XINJIANGHORIZONS

May 2013



Kashgar viewpoints

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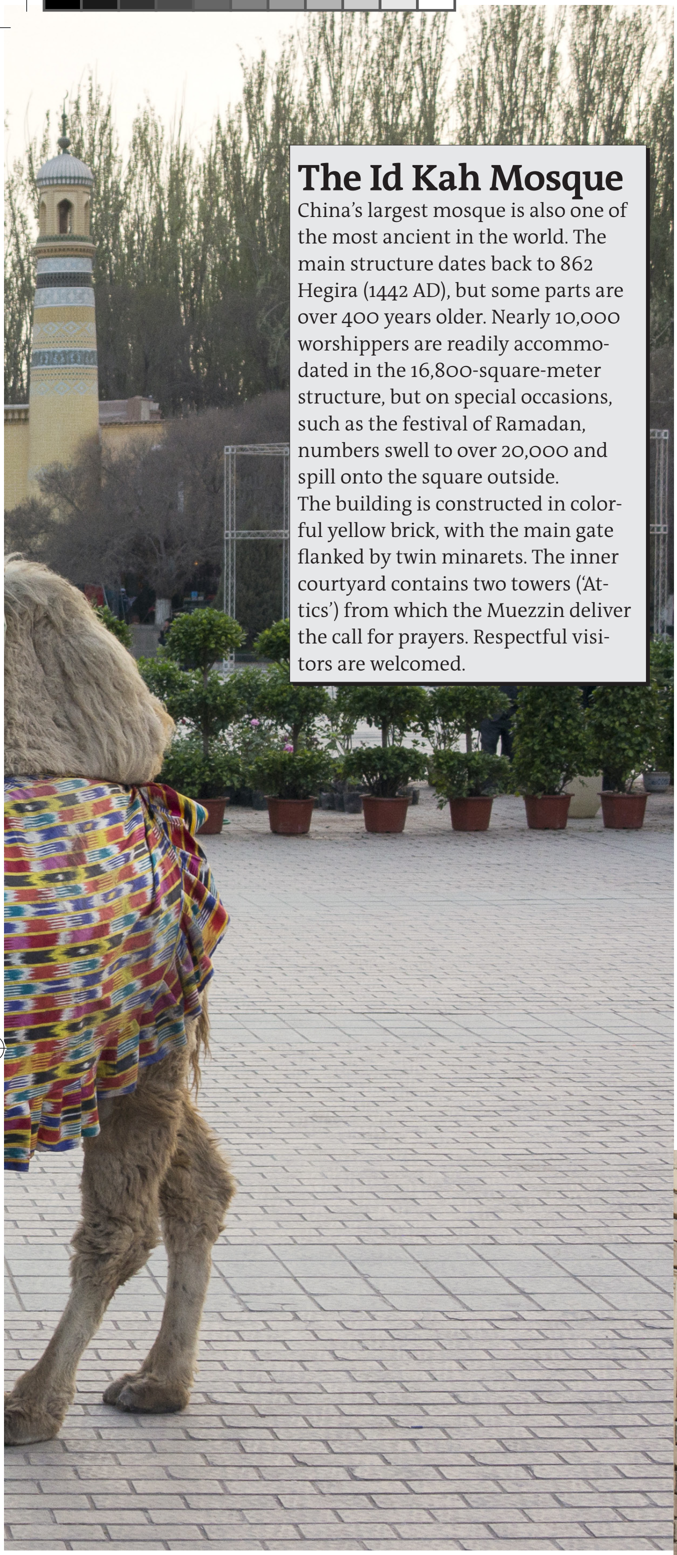
Time-Travels in Kashgar

THE MANY FACETS OF THE OLD TOWN

Long before it had grown to the size of a city and acquired its old name of Shule, in the final centuries of the first millennium BC, Kashgar was already a meeting place. Situated at the western edge of the Tarim Basin, between the Pamir Mountains and the Taklimakan Desert, this oasis settlement was for over two millennia the principal junction-box through which Chinese civilization plugged itself into the commercial and diplomatic arteries of Central Asia and the world beyond. By the time it became known to the world as 'Kashgar', from 860 AD, its origins as a simple Silk Road caravan stop lay well over a thousand years in its past. It had become one of the great cultural hubs of the Eurasian landmass, defined by what it brought together, a cosmopolitan city of thriving bazaars, crowded inns, famed schools, and exquisite mosques. It was a place where East met West, and where ancient mysteries met ambitions of fortune and discovery. Suspended between a dazzling heritage and the complexities of modernizing development, these memories and dreams live on in the Kashgar of the present day.

By modern Chinese standards, today's Kashgar is a small city, with a metropolitan population of just 300,000, a figure that only rises to two million when all of its eleven surrounding counties are included. The historic center is quite dense, and invitingly walkable, which allows determined explorers to familiarize themselves with its general features in no more than a few days. For most visitors, the roughly east-west axis



The Id Kah Mosque

China's largest mosque is also one of the most ancient in the world. The main structure dates back to 862 Hegira (1442 AD), but some parts are over 400 years older. Nearly 10,000 worshippers are readily accommodated in the 16,800-square-meter structure, but on special occasions, such as the festival of Ramadan, numbers swell to over 20,000 and spill onto the square outside.
The building is constructed in colorful yellow brick, with the main gate flanked by twin minarets. The inner courtyard contains two towers ('Attics') from which the Muezzin deliver the call for prayers. Respectful visitors are welcomed.

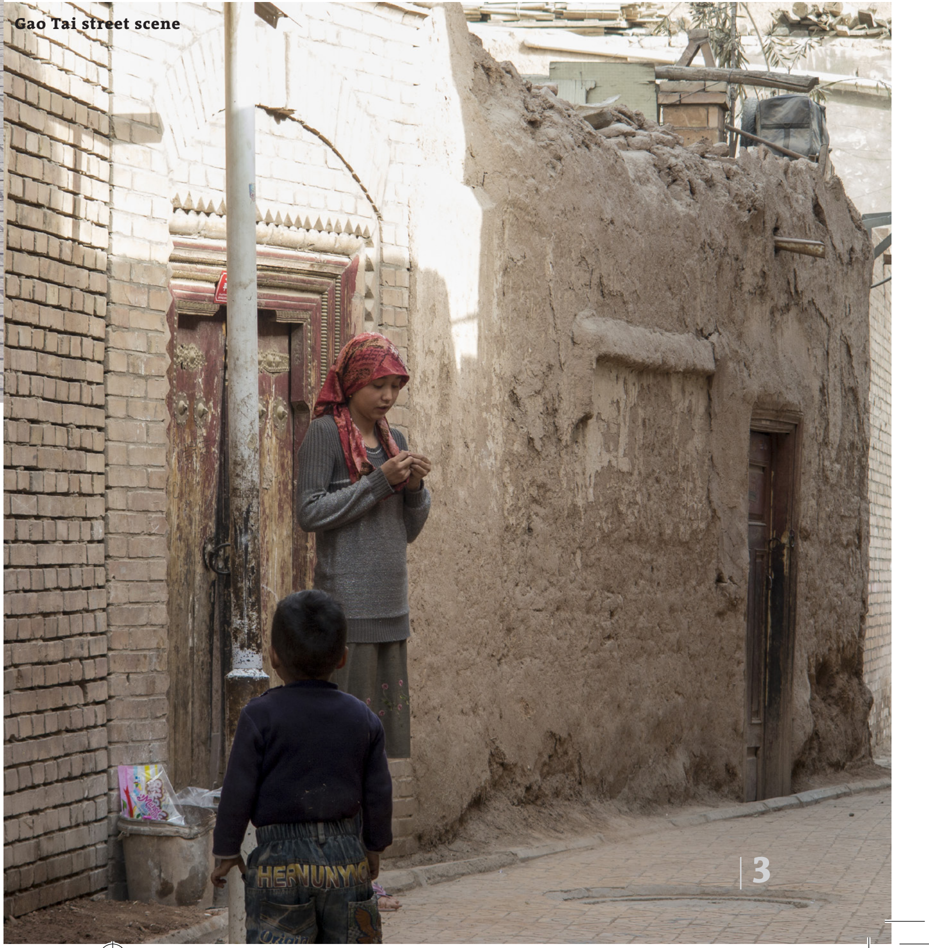
from the Grand Bazaar, through the heart of the old town, past the night market and Id Kah Mosque, and along Ostangboyi Road, provides the most concentrated array of attractions. A meandering walk on this route, less than five kilometers in length, suffices to provide an impressive sense of the historic city, which a small number of targeted excursions can enrich.

There is no doubt some truth to the common assumption that the rise of maritime commerce since the European Renaissance cast the overland caravan routes of the Silk Road into eclipse. To those visiting Kashgar's Grand Bazaar, however, the limits of this assumption are immediately evident. The Silk Road never died. Perhaps it never even slept. Squint only slightly, and the merchants of today are nearly lost amongst the teeming ghosts of their predecessors, drawing traders from every corner of the earth to settle on prices for fabrics, carpets, blankets, curtains, scarves, shawls, hats, furs, prayer rugs, craft goods, spices, teas, medicines, dried fruit, nuts, and a myriad other commodities, as they have for countless centuries before. Immersed in a subtly ordered chaos of colors, textures, aromas, and conversations, Kashgar's merchants perpetuate their city's principal tradition with unselfconscious fidelity.

To the west of the Grand Bazaar, across the Tuman River, lies the Old Town, concentrated in space, but divided by development style. Each of its three major sections follows a distinct path towards reconciliation with modernity. The first to be encountered is at once the most 'pristine' and manifestly the least resilient, deliberately isolated from the main currents of Kashgar's urban development, so that it constitutes a small island of antiquity.

Gao Tai, set upon a low hill beside East Lake (Donghu), even looks like an island. It consists of a tightly-packed jumble of winding lanes and modest dwellings, dating back many centuries, which are home to roughly a thousand families. The buildings, constructed in traditional fashion from bricks and mud, are enchantingly exotic – evoking a distance in space and time that foreign visitors find utterly captivating. Overhanging rooms form ramshackle bridges across the laneways, adding to the sense of cavernous intimacy. Many of the doors have two bells, with one dedicated solely to unaccompanied women (to defend against violations of purdah). Other than the occasional motor-scooter, there is little to suggest that this historic enclave is part of a modern city.

Yet the same features that impress outsiders with their unspoiled authenticity can seem stranded in time to local inhabitants, whose old dwellings are challengingly under-served by modern amenities, commercial opportunities, or even a workable model for tourism revenue. The skilled local artisans, working in crumbling structures under what must be stunningly difficult conditions, gently lament the shortage of customers for their hats, pots, and other crafts. Plans to charge an entrance fee to the site were


Gao Tai street scene

Kursun Tari's pottery workshop, Gao Tai

scrapped when the deterrent effect proved excessive, and there seems no obvious way to provide occasions for tourist spending without changing the area beyond recognition. With the eyes of a conservation-sensitive world focused upon Gao Tai, the search for an uncontroversial balance between local development aspirations and heritage protection is unlikely to be easy, and the way forward remains unclear.

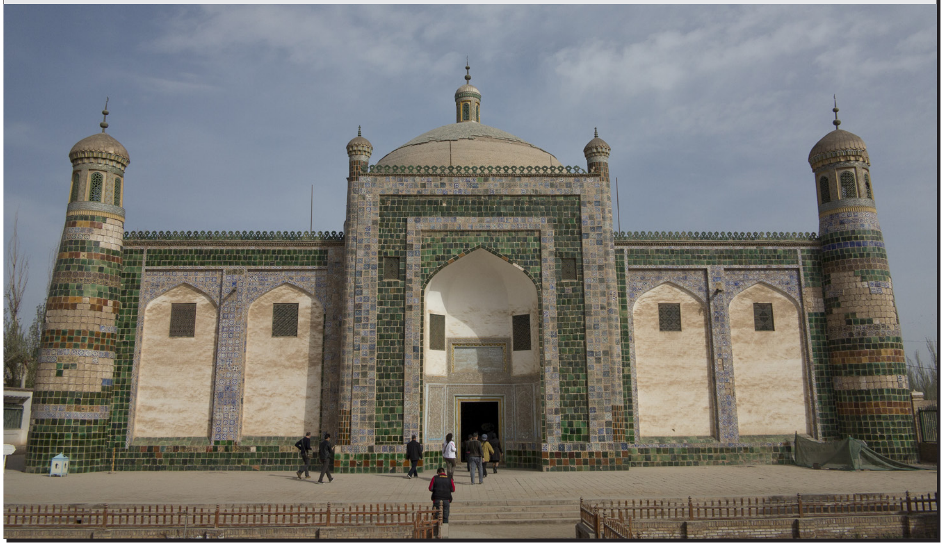
Directly across the road from Gao Tai, reconstruction overwhelms preservation, and a new old town is emerging, with completion of the project expected by the end of 2013.

For any visitor from Shanghai, comparison with that city's Xintiandi development is inescapable, since here too a modern recapitulation of local cultural and architectural heritage is being married to systematic gentrification, with social and economic revitalization set as an explicit goal. Abundant tri-lingual signage offers succinct explanation of local sights, styles, and historical associations, whilst dining and refreshment spots mark out the area as a leisure destination, overlooked by a magnificent new hotel (constructed in an exuberantly traditional style) situated upon the dominating hill.

The main thoroughfare of this area is Areya Road, named after a riverside cliff, where people sought refuge from the flooding Tuman River during the Shule state period. Compared to the picturesque hovels of Gao Tai, the buildings lining Areya Road are sturdy, spacious, comfortable, and comprehensively renovated. Their dialog with tradition takes place through fabulous decorative facades, whose intricate brick tessellations, carved arches, delicate woodwork, and ornamental doors often accounted for more than half of the total construction cost. Craft shops and restaurants occupy the ground floor, with a further

The Abakh Khoja Mausoleum

The tomb of revered Sufi teacher Abakh Khoja is an essential stop on any Kashgar itinerary. Built in 1640, it is reputedly the resting place for 72 members of the Abakh family, although only 58 tombs are found there. The structure includes the largest domed roof in Xinjiang (29 meters in height, 35 meters in width). It is luxuriously decorated in colored tiles, each unique. The Emperor Qianlong visited the mosque in 1795, ordering its thorough renovation, and meeting the young descendant of Abakh Khoja, Iparhan, the legendary 'fragrant concubine' Xiang Fei (who became Qianlong's favorite). Xiang Fei instructed that upon her death she should be returned to Kashgar for burial. Her funerary carriage is still on display in the mausoleum.



Areya Road

Hats in Gao Tai

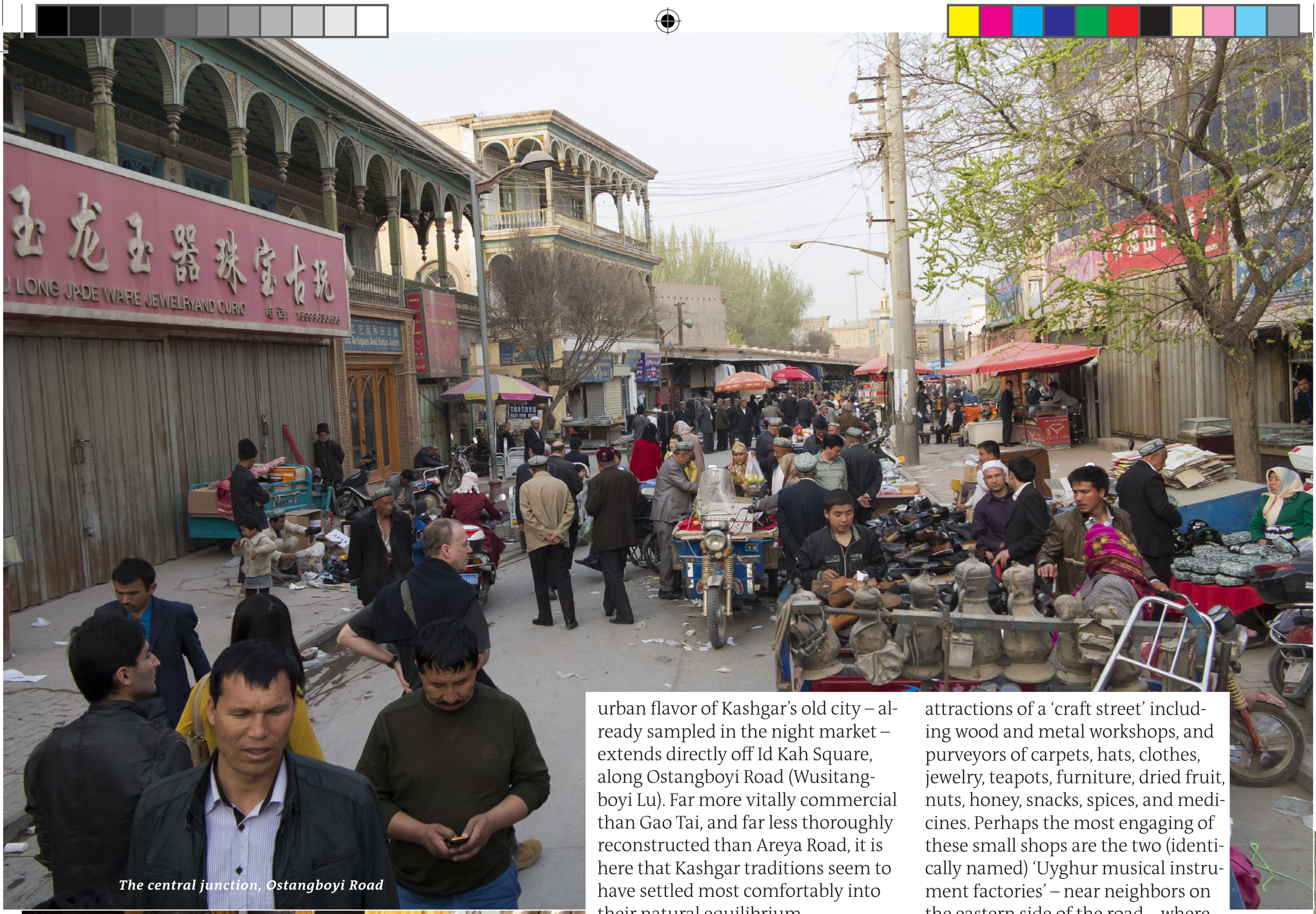
story or two of living quarters above, including a number of remarkably opulent apartments. An 'Old-style inn' celebrates Silk Road hospitality.

Areya Road is intersected by Kazanqiyabesi Road, whose name commemorates a young hero who slew a troublesome river devil in an iron wok. This legend motivates a metallic theme, elaborated by an imposing anvil sculpture at the nearby crossroads, and by a cluster of blacksmith shops, making door ornaments, farming implements, tools, and kitchen utensils.

A heading west, along and beyond the restored section of Areya Road, leads into a maze of atmospheric lanes, scattered architectural treasures, spice vendors, and backstreet life, connecting to Kashgar's small but delightful 'Hambasri' night market. Rows of overflowing snack stalls and shops line the street, selling bread fresh from the oven, a dizzying variety of wraps and pastries, skewers, and fruit. Set back a little from the hubbub, many of the city's most beautiful buildings are to be found here, and further west, along Ostangboyi Road. Patiently awaiting the ambiguities of redevelopment, these dignified, balconied, dingily colorful, and gracefully dilapidated structures are saturated with history and the sense of place. Some serve as tea-houses, allowing visitors to bask at leisure in their quiet grandeur, and in the colorful tumult below.

Directly across from the night market, across a busy street (use the underpass), stretches Id Kah Square, dominated by the largest mosque in China. This is the best place in Kashgar to encounter a camel or two, to absorb the city's unique atmosphere, and to delight in its finest architectural prospects. It is also a place to stop for a meal, or just a pot of delicious Xinjiang tea, whilst watching the life of the city drift past beneath, from the top floor of the much-loved Mengyol restaurant (neither the sharp, creamy yogurt, nor the 'Mengyol special tea' is to be missed by any sane visitor).

After the very different qualities of Gao Tai and Areya Road, the third



The central junction, Ostangboyi Road

urban flavor of Kashgar's old city – already sampled in the night market – extends directly off Id Kah Square, along Ostangboyi Road (Wusitangboyi Lu). Far more vitally commercial than Gao Tai, and far less thoroughly reconstructed than Areya Road, it is here that Kashgar traditions seem to have settled most comfortably into their natural equilibrium.

Ostangboyi Road consists of two main stretches, connected at an angle, with its heart at the junction. Where the road's east-west and (roughly) north-south sections meet, its architectural splendors reach a climax amongst some of the city's most ravishing scenes. This is also the place where most of the road's small restaurants, tea houses, and snack stalls cluster, offering the perfect excuse to linger. The final (north-south) section of the road is less architecturally distinguished, but it is packed with the attractions of a 'craft street' including wood and metal workshops, and purveyors of carpets, hats, clothes, jewelry, teapots, furniture, dried fruit, nuts, honey, snacks, spices, and medicines. Perhaps the most engaging of these small shops are the two (identically named) 'Uyghur musical instrument factories' – near neighbors on the eastern side of the road – where a range of astonishing handmade musical instruments are proudly displayed. Two small mosques serve the devotional needs of the local population.

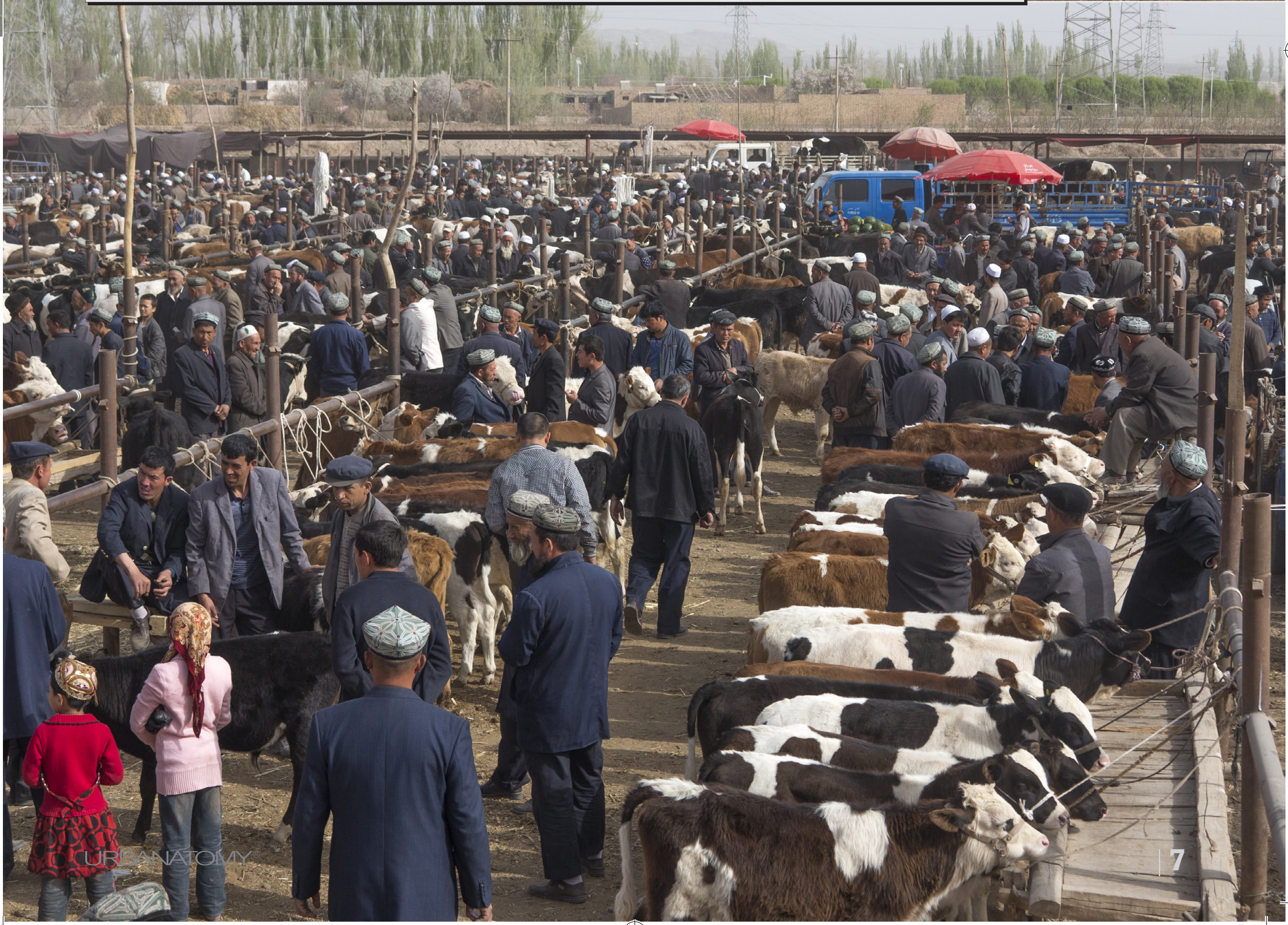
Kashgar is a city undergoing rapid development, and far more is happening there than an exploration of the Old Town will discover. For anybody focused upon the distinctive identity of this astounding city, however, its Old Town – still suffused with the spirit of the Silk Road – is the obvious place to begin.

The Livestock Market

Over the course of history, the exemplary Silk Road transaction has been an exchange of silks from China's Jiangnan region for Central Asian horses. Naturally enough, therefore, the trade in animals was a long-established business in the city's Grand Bazaar. As this trade became more tightly localized, its downtown location was reduced to a bothersome anachronism, and it was moved to a site of its own, at Dolatbagh village, eight kilometers to the north-west.

Although trading is now conducted primarily among local herders, farmers, and butchers, it remains crucially important to the city, and scarcely less attractive to casual visitors (who attend in significant numbers). Animals are brought from all of Kashgar's 12 counties to the market, where sheep, cattle, horses, donkeys, and even camels are bought and sold for breeding, transport, and food. At least 5,000 animals are traded each market day.

Ordinarily, a sheep will change hands for roughly RMB 2,000, but an especially distinguished animal – marked out by a 'high nose' – can fetch over 1,000 times as much. One terrible story circulating in the market concerned an unfortunate animal-breeder, who – it was said – had purchased an exceptionally fine sheep for no less than RMB6 million. The very next day this woolly treasure died of disease. The buyer and his wife, utterly ruined, were so broken in spirit that they soon followed the beast to their graves.



The Eurasian Connection

STAGES OF THE SILK ROAD

Due to the Silk Road, the ancient empires of China and Rome were aware of each other over two millennia ago. The Romans knew the 'Seres' (Chinese) as a distant civilization, located at the eastern edge of the world, adept at the incomprehensible art of silk-making. The Chinese historians of the Han Dynasty had a reciprocal, and equally nebulous knowledge of a great western empire that they called 'Da Qin', a remote source of precious metals, dyes, strange plants and animals, and exotic trade goods.

Between these ultimate poles stretched the Silk Road, a tangled skein rather than a single thread, crossing fearsome deserts and mountains, at times relayed by great intermediate civilizations, at others harried and disrupted by fierce nomads, binding the Eurasian landmass into a complex commercial and cultural whole.

It was not until 1877 that the Silk Road acquired its modern, Western name, from the writings and lectures of the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (uncle of the famous 'Red Baron'). If it is followed as silk was conveyed for distant trade, from east to west, it began in Xi'an (known as 'Chang'an' until the Ming Dynasty). It then continued through the Hexi or Gansu Corridor, to Dunhuang, at the edge of the Tarim Basin, where it split into three – a Southern and Northern Route, traversing the foothills of the Tianshan and Kunlun Mountains respectively,

and a Central Route, which crossed the harsh Taklimakan Desert (whose name means 'those who enter never leave'). These roads re-combined at the approach to the Pamir Mountains, in the oasis city of Kashgar, before continuing west into south and central Asia, and as far as Rome.

The engine of trade is disequilibrium, or uneven distribution. That which is relatively abundant, and cheap, is conveyed to a place where it is scarce, and thus expensive. Such 'arbitrage' is the essence of commercial enterprise. In the case of the Silk Road, this commercial engine ran upon differences of exceptional extremity, because the agricultural bases of its eastern and western poles had arisen in mutual isolation, with distinct origins, and were thus – at the beginning – perfect strangers to each other. The Western staples, wheat and barley, had originated in the Fertile Crescent, spreading north and west into Europe. The East, in contrast, supported its population upon millet and rice. East and West rested upon distinct agricultural foundations, and these differences were not restricted to staples. From the East, the West received sugar cane, soybeans, peaches, almonds, cinnamon, ginger, and rhubarb. In return, the East received alfalfa, fava beans (broad beans), peas, turnips, spinach, watermelons (originally from Africa), cucumbers, pomegranates, walnuts, and lichis. Radiating outwards, east and west from the center, were lemons, cotton, sesame, carrots, apples, and perhaps onions

and garlic. Different citrus fruits were exchanged in both directions. The aubergine, swelling across time, from a small oval vegetable to the large tubular one we know today, traveled first west, then east, as it changed.

In strictly commercial terms, however, the most important agricultural difference was the most sophisticated, and sumptuous. This was the one determined by the unique sericulture (silk cultivation) of China, and the viniculture (grape cultivation) of the West, each entirely unknown to the other until brought into connection by the Silk Road.

Patterns of commerce could not be expected to remain consistent over the course of two millennia, but it is safe to say that the typical structure of exchange was a relay, rather than a meeting of (eastern and western) poles. China, densely populated, and short of grazing land, was ill-suited to the rearing of horses, whilst its military situation, exposed to a vast arc of fierce nomadic peoples to north and west, made access to horses an indispensable strategic requirement. For this reason, the principal exchange dominating the eastern stretch of the Silk Road involved the purchase of horses for bolts of silk. These quantities of silk were then carried westwards, through ancient empires (Kushan, Sogdian, Parthian, Persian, Abbasid, Seleucid, Roman or Byzantine, among others that rose and fell through the ages). Such chains of transaction meant that only a small minority of merchants would complete an entire journey from east to west (or inversely). Instead, commodities, rumors, customs, and ideas were propelled in stages across continuous distances that only the hardiest and boldest travelers ever crossed.

> "The term 'silk road' thus refers to more than just trade in silk between China and Rome over a few centuries. It stands for the exchanges of things and ideas, both intended and accidental, through trade, diplomacy, conquest, migration, and pilgrimage that intensified integration of the Afrom-Eurasion continent from the Neolithic through modern times. Warriors, missionaries, nomads, emissaries, and artisans as well as merchants contributed to this ongoing cross-fertilization, which thrived under imperial and religious unifications."
>
> **James A. Millward (The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction)**

Some of those who made and recorded epic journeys have become legends, such as Zhang Qian, Xuanzang, Ibn Battuta, and Marco Polo, each an iconic figure within his respective civilization, and even beyond it. These travelers reported observations that rose above the 'Chinese whispers' chains of the caravans, establishing direct cultural communication between distant peoples, with dramatic, transformative effect.

The Silk Road was a thoroughfare of ideas, communicating Buddhism eastwards in China, and the 'four great inventions' (compass, gunpowder, paper-making, and printing) from east to west, where they would eventually lay the foundations of European (and thus global) modernity. Ideas were often incarnated in trade goods, such as the various musical instruments that were carried in both directions, fundamentally transforming the musical cultures of the civilizations they crossed. At other times they were recorded in books, especially the religious scriptures of Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Islam that reached China from the West.

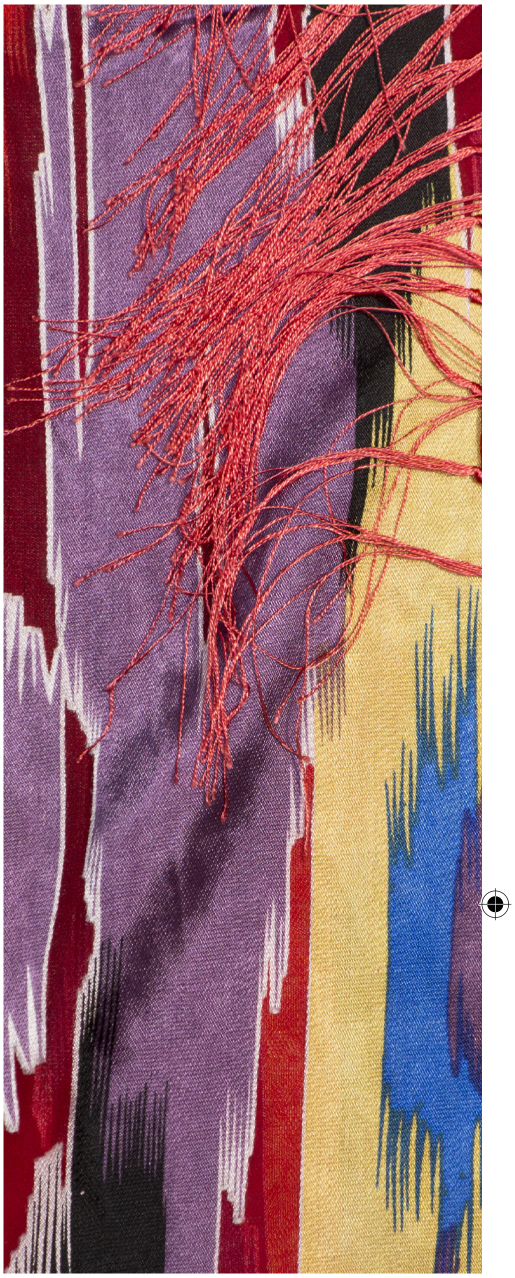
Prominent among the imports that fixed the exoticism of the West in the eyes of Chinese were animals. African megafauna were no doubt the most impressive: the lion, giraffe, ostrich, and rhinoceros. From India came the peacock, accompanied by powerful cultural associations from further west, in the courts of ancient Babylonia and Persia, where it was linked to the idea of royalty. The greatest practical impact, however, belongs to the camel, another 'western' animal, second only to the horse in importance.

Of the commodities hungrily absorbed by Central Asian, Middle Eastern, and Western markets, blue-and-white porcelain deserves special mention. Often disdained by the Chinese literati as an object of domestic consumption, blue-and-white ware from Jingdezhen was an early

export-oriented industry, eagerly collected at almost every stage of the Silk Road, and contributing decisively to the aesthetics of European Chinoiserie. Dutch and English manufacturers would eventually master the art of porcelain manufacture for themselves, but even after doing to, Chinese styles remained an indelible feature.

Beyond the dangers of the Silk Road's forbidding terrain and fierce tribes, it had a dark side of enormous historical importance, as a conduit of plague. As the Eurasian landmass was knitted together into a commercial whole, eased towards biological equilibrium by exchanges of crops and produce, morbid diseases were released from isolation, and spread out along the great trade corridor. In these catastrophic events, no less than the benign and productive ones, the complex interactions between nomads and farmers, travelers and concentrated urban settlements, commerce and nature, were intensified by the world's great thoroughfare, drawing the peoples of Eurasia's eastern and western poles into a common historical experience.

Although the Silk Road never died, its influence indisputably waned, as the rising importance of maritime commerce between great port cities side-lined overland trade routes. The meaning of the Silk Road, however, has undergone no comparable decline. It tells history in a way that foregrounds cultural communication over the distinctness of peoples, exemplifying the resilient bonds of trade across time. Above all, it tells a Eurasian story, one that cannot be broken into parts without loss of information and understanding. It was through mixture that history took place.



Zhang Qian

It might seem unrealistic to expect a phenomenon as complex as the Silk Road to have had a simple, unambiguous beginning. There is nevertheless a persuasive candidate for such an origin: the two journeys of the imperial envoy Zhang Qian, beginning in the years 138 and 119 BC.

Zhang Qian's expeditions were motivated by a search for allies against the terrifying Xiongnu, who had swept down from the Mongolian steppes to wreak havoc along China's frontiers. These journeys carried Zhang Qian as far west as modern Afghanistan, through extraordinary adventures, which included captivity in the hands of the Xiongnu, and even marriage to a Xiongnu woman. Whilst indecisive in their primary purpose, these expeditions succeeded at a far more important level, encountering civilizations to the west with which China could engage in mutually profitable exchange – giving birth to the Silk Road. Today, Zhang Qian's achievements are celebrated by the new Shule Historical Museum, in Shule County, which tells the story of the Silk Road as it unfolded from this beginning. His statue gazes out across the outskirts of the still-spreading Silk Road city of Kashgar, as the ancient story continues.

Voices of the Bazaar

WHERE THE SILK ROAD STILL LIVES

BY LI JING

Kashgar's Grand Bazaar is the largest international marketplace in northwestern China. Until 1992 it was only open on Sundays, and known as the "Sunday Bazaar". It has been open daily since then, but the atmosphere still swells on Sundays.

For over two millennia it has functioned as a Silk Road trade hub, and for many of these centuries it was considered "the largest fair in Asia". It remains a place to experience the ancient art form of shopping amidst a kaleidoscope of colors in perpetual motion. Haggling with ethnic Uyghurs, Pakistani traders and nomadic Kazakhs is a lot of fun and can easily consume an entire day.

There are over 5,000 stalls in the bazaar, falling under roughly 20 categories. They offer everything from fluffy sheepskin hats, exotic fabrics of every imaginable variety, dried fruit and nuts, and myriads of herbal teas, to binoculars from Kyrgyzstan, silk scarves from Turkey, and beads and buttons from the middle of nowhere. Combining the ambience of an open marketplace with the convenience of a modern retail outlet, the Grand Bazaar offers a unique opportunity for lively interaction with the local people.

Even when walking away from a booth after half an hour's haggling, having purchased nothing and sampled everything possible for free, you can still expect a sincere thank you and a heartwarming smile from the owner. Most of the merchants are too busy to indulge in idle speculations about the role their hometown played in the remote times of jingling camel bells, but the Silk Road legacy still flows in their blood. Every trader in today's 'Sunday Bazaar' is a living testament to the glories of a city forged from business acumen, open-mindedness, and friendliness. Over the generations, the obliging smiles of Kashgar's people have never faded.

Muhtarjan,

age 40, with eight years at the bazaar

If you need a little color in your life, Muhtarjan is the man for you. Most of his stock comes from South Korea, but don't ask him how it gets to his stall. Muhtarjan explained that Uyghur people can never get enough colors, so as long as his clothes are bright and cheerful there is no need for him to worry about the competition.

"My family has been in fabric dealing for at least two generations. Although I never asked my predecessors why they chose to source our stock from South Korea, we have made a living of bringing things from weird places into Kashgar for a very long time."

Mahatjan,

in his 50s, with about 20 years at the bazaar

Who would have thought your clothes could be good for you? Mahatjan's His best 'etlas' (the Uyghur word for silk), comes all the way from Hetian. Truly proud of his roots, Mahatjan has never left his hometown.

"I belong here. I live an ordinary life and being ordinary is the most beautiful thing to me. Tourists from inland places can never get enough of my etlas. Wearing etlas is truly good for your body and gives you a strong, healthy heart. And you can't go wrong with etlas when you need a perfect souvenir from Kashgar."

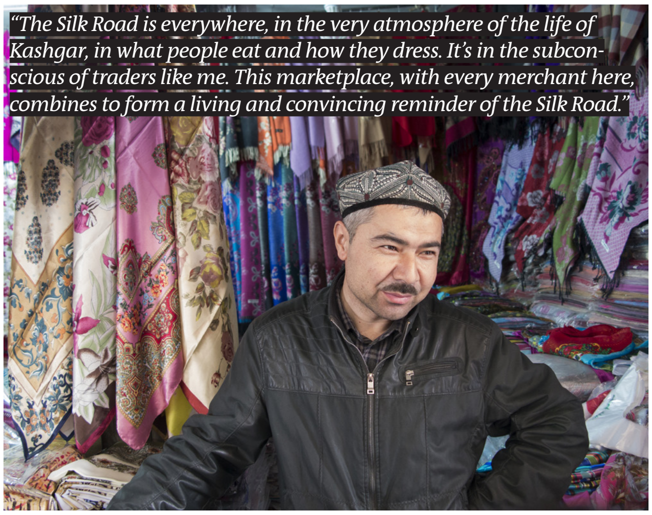
Mijitajim,

age 56, with about 10 years at the bazaar

Calmness is a man named Mijitajim. If you sat down on one of his soft, beautiful pieces you would understand why he doesn't worry. Not only are they a delight for him but they are a delight for his lucky customers too.

"This time of year is not the prime time to sell carpets and I could sit here for a few days without seeing a single piece sold, but I'm not worried. I have a full range of things from Belgium and Pakistan as well as a dozen places in Xinjiang to offer, but the carpets from Hetian are my number one product."

"The Silk Road is everywhere, in the very atmosphere of the life of Kashgar, in what people eat and how they dress. It's in the subconscious of traders like me. This marketplace, with every merchant here, combines to form a living and convincing reminder of the Silk Road."



Kadijan,

age 44, with 19 years at the bazaar (since 1994)

Those stuck in a boring office job looking at their PC screens all day should take a leaf out of Kadijan's book. Selling silk and linen pieces from Turkey, Kadijan's earnings are usually just enough to get by on, but the peak seasons bring a much more prosperous time, with a mouthwatering RMB 20,000 per month racked up.

"Foreign tourists seem to know more about how to bargain with us than those from the inland places of China."

Kasimjan,

age 25, with about 10 years at the bazaar

Although he may not see any tarmac, Kasimjan is very aware that the Silk Road is out there...and it's leading all the way to his stall. Selling incredible silver ornaments that have come all the way from Pakistan and Turkey, Kasimjan's first few years in the market weren't great, but his luck has grown since. One thing that Kasimjan knows is that when it comes to a bargain, foreigners are nothing like as inept as they are often thought to be.

"I go to school from Monday to Friday but spend most of my weekends here to help my father and brother, especially when they are short of hands. The grapes and figs are from Hetian. They are very popular and my brother makes around RMB 2,000 a month, which is great."

Elhamjan,

age 16, with five 5 years at the bazaar

Making sure that he provides a helping hand when his family needs it, Elhamjam is always ready to serve his hungry customers. Business has been good for young Elhamjam, but he is also a keen student at school and hopes to go to college in the not-too-distant future.

Mamatemiujan,

age 38, with 13 years at the bazaar

Mamatemiujan is fully aware of where the Silk Road came from. He told us the road had been paved by his great grandfathers. Mamatemiujan had to leave his farmer's life behind after his parents died. He then tried to make a living by peddling small items. His business started as a little fur shop, supported financially by his elder brother. Now it sells goods from as far afield as Canada. He is sometimes assisted in his half-rented and half-bought 'furry' booth by a junior partner, the teenage son of his brother, when he doesn't have to go to school.

"I have nothing to complain about. I have never left Xinjiang in my life and I never had to, not even for my business."

Mihrinsa and Ruzadamu,

three years at the bazaar

Although Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, may make the headlines, this couple are true believers that home is where the heart is. Mihrinsa, her radiant beauty evevn visible through her veil, is especially grateful to the Silk Road as it means her husband Ruzadamu never has to travel too far to do business.

"We moved back to Kashgar after several years of running a business in Urumqi, in order to be with my family. Urumqi is fine if you are just there to make a living, but it is nothing compared with my hometown. From time to time my husband is away for a couple of days to replenish our stock but he is always back soon. I will never leave Kashgar because I feel happier here."

Tewekkuli's,

age 36, with six years in the bazaar

Tewekkuli's tale is unlike those of his many friends at the market. A very modest man (he had to be coaxed out in front of our photographer), he may be a little camera shy but is never afraid of adventure. "I spent seven years in Urumqi and then 10 years in Beijing, selling Xinjiang specialties and trying my luck by running a restaurant there." Unfortunately the rent became unbearably high and so Tewekkuli returned back to his home to focus on his carpet business. "Even after I had returned home, my brother chose to continue his journey outside Xinjiang. He is now running two restaurants – in Beijing and Shanghai. The one in Shanghai is called Afanty, named after the legendary sage."

Many of his carpets are brought in from Belgium, falling into the cotton and silk category instead of the wool variety. "I'd love to go there to have a look at the country and how they make their carpets someday. Tourists from the inland places are huge fans of such silk and cotton carpets, because woolen carpets get dirty easily. They are also vulnerable to moths in the humid south."

Tewekkuli always looks forward to the summer, as business normally turns brisk from June onwards. "The good days usually last for about five months, until winter sets in. During the quieter times it's natural to feel upset after a whole day has passed without selling a single piece, but this off-season lull doesn't bother me at all now, because I have been in this game for so long."

Tewekkuli is a man who knows that in life you have to take the rough with the smooth. "When doing business in Beijing I lost about RMB 600,000. But I had enjoyed a life already. Money is a transient thing. Different people have different hearts, you know." His concerns transcend money making. "What I most care about is having a son so that he can protect my three little girls. Uyghur people love their children so much that they want to make sure there is always a man in the family to protect the womenfolk."

Who are the Uyghurs?

A PEOPLE SPEAK THROUGH THEIR CULTURE

The early history of the Uyghurs is uncertain, but by tradition, language, and genetic evidence they are known to be a Turkic people whose distinct identity was consolidated during the mid-7th century, in what is today the south-western part of the PRC's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Over three-quarters of the present day Uyghur population still inhabit the arid Tarim Basin, ringed by the Tianshan, Pamir, Karakoram, and Kunlun mountain ranges, and dominated by the fearsome Taklimakan Desert. Although Buddhist in ancient times, the Uyghurs have been strongly identified with their Sunni Islam faith for over a thousand years.

The culture of the Uyghurs has been inseparable from the Silk Road that traverses their homeland, and this is reflected in the absorption of hybrid elements, with the Persian influence being especially pronounced. Uyghur culture has integrated the Persian New Year festival of Nowruz, which is celebrated enthusiastically every year on March 21 with feasts, sports, and musical performances. Both ancient and modern Uyghur architectural styles exhibit distinct Persian characteristics.

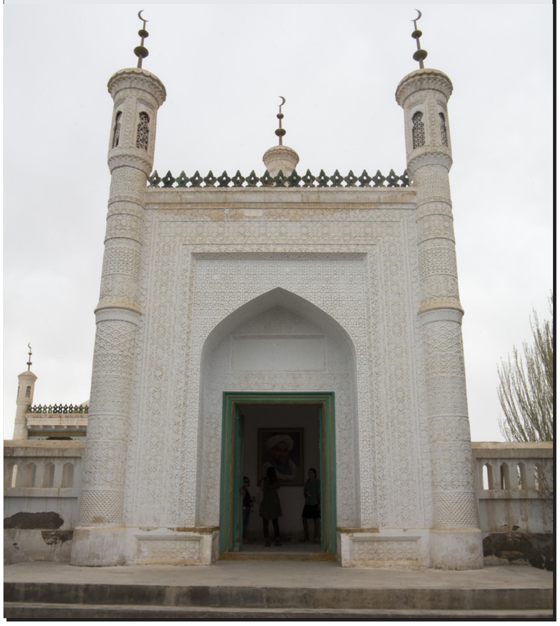
The Uyghur people proudly install themselves within an intellectual tradition that flourished most gloriously during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when the Han Chinese were experiencing the parallel golden age of the Song Dynasty. It was during this time that the great scholars Mahmud al-Kashgari and Yusuf Khass Hajib wrote works whose brilliance remains undimmed.

Modern Uyghur literature continues to inspire readers throughout the region. Among the most respected names are Zunun Kadir (1911-1989); Abdurehim Tileshup Otkur (1923-1995); Zordun Sabir (1937-98); Memtimin Hoshur (1944-); and Ahtam Omar (1963-).

Uyghur classical music also enjoys a renown extending well beyond Xinjiang itself. The Uyghur musical canon or 'Twelve Muqam' was compiled by the concubine Amanni Shahan of the Yerqiang kingdom (1526-1560), preserving and relaying an art that would be recognized by UNESCO (in 2005) as part of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Mahmud al-Kashgari Mausoleum

Mahmud al-Kashgari (1005-1102) is considered the greatest Uyghur sage, famed for his Grand Turkic Dictionary, in which the language, poetry, and even geography of the ancient Turkic peoples of Central Asia is recorded. His tomb is located in a beautiful park outside Kashgar, atop a forested hill. According to legend, this spot was decided early in his life. He had been told that his final resting place would be decided by a twig taking root. Ayi Ayi Tierek, the tree that fulfils that prophecy, is still alive, growing from a small spring.



Yusuf Khass Hajib Mausoleum

Yusuf Khass Hajib (1019-1085), author of the Kutadgu Bilig, known in Chinese as the Fulezhihui or in English as 'The Wisdom that brings Happiness', is esteemed second only to Mahmud al-Kashgari among Uyghur scholars. His book teaches the way to apply the mind to human flourishing, and its immediate renown earned him the honorific 'Khass Hajib' meaning chancellor or 'special advisor to the king'. His tomb today is among the most beautiful buildings in the region, its calm white cloisters and sophisticated acoustics attesting to its history as a place of learning and to the life of a teacher exalted there in calligraphy as 'The Greatest Uyghur Philosopher'.

A Taste of Xinjiang

FROM STREET TO PALACE IN KASHGAR

BY LI JING

At the angled heart of Ostangboyi Road, four busy Uyghurs who call themselves "true men" produce the world's most succulent mutton and onion pastries – or samsa. Their workplace, Ostengbuyi Meatpies, has established its enviable reputation by serving locals with the delicacy for 30 years. Two of these "true men" sweat in silence, shrouded in hazy smoke from their tandoor, making sure every samsa comes out of the stove picture perfect and plump. The restaurant is exclusively dedicated to producing a continuous flow of samsa, for two kuai a piece, tossed onto your platter with diced mutton still sizzling in the bulging wrap, and providing enough energy for another few hours of urban exploration.

Nearby roadside barbecue stalls offer authentic Xinjiang kababs, made of such fresh mutton that most locals see no need whatsoever for flavor enhancers such as spicy cumin or pepper frosting. One attractive option for a quick lunch is an improvised Kashgar sandwich – use a slice of nan (the crisp, golden Xinjiang bread and staff of life in Uyghur culture) to wrap the sizzling mutton taken off the skewer. Local children often break a nan into a bowl of milk or yoghurt. Having long sustained Silk Road merchants on their desert journeys, nan is still ubiquitous. Some are as wide as dinner plates and used as platters for soaking up the juices of skewered kebabs, others are similar to East European bialys.

Kashgar's historical role as an ancient bridge between China and Europe is strikingly apparent in the local pasta cookery. From elegant restaurants to greasy spoons, almost every eatery offers pasta dishes bursting with flavor and made from hand-pulled noodles. The sauce typically consists of peppers, chili, beans and radishes. A huge platter of pasta looks good, tastes good and best of all, it is good for you.

Every Uygur housewife in Kashgar is a tea expert. You just can't go wrong with anything served by a beaming waitress holding an engraved copper teapot. Sipping several rounds of saffron-flavored tea on the upstairs veranda of a charming tea-house is a delight not to be missed.

For the luxury-end of the Kashgar gourmet experience, the newly-opened Kasir Food Palace is an essential destination. You can even order from an iPad. The banquet at this sumptuous two-story restaurant starts with a cup of what might be called "Mom's mystery yoghurt", followed by a cornucopia of delicacies, from fine herbal tea to such westerner-friendly main courses as deep-fried, spicy king prawns with French fries and onion-flavored lamp chops.

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